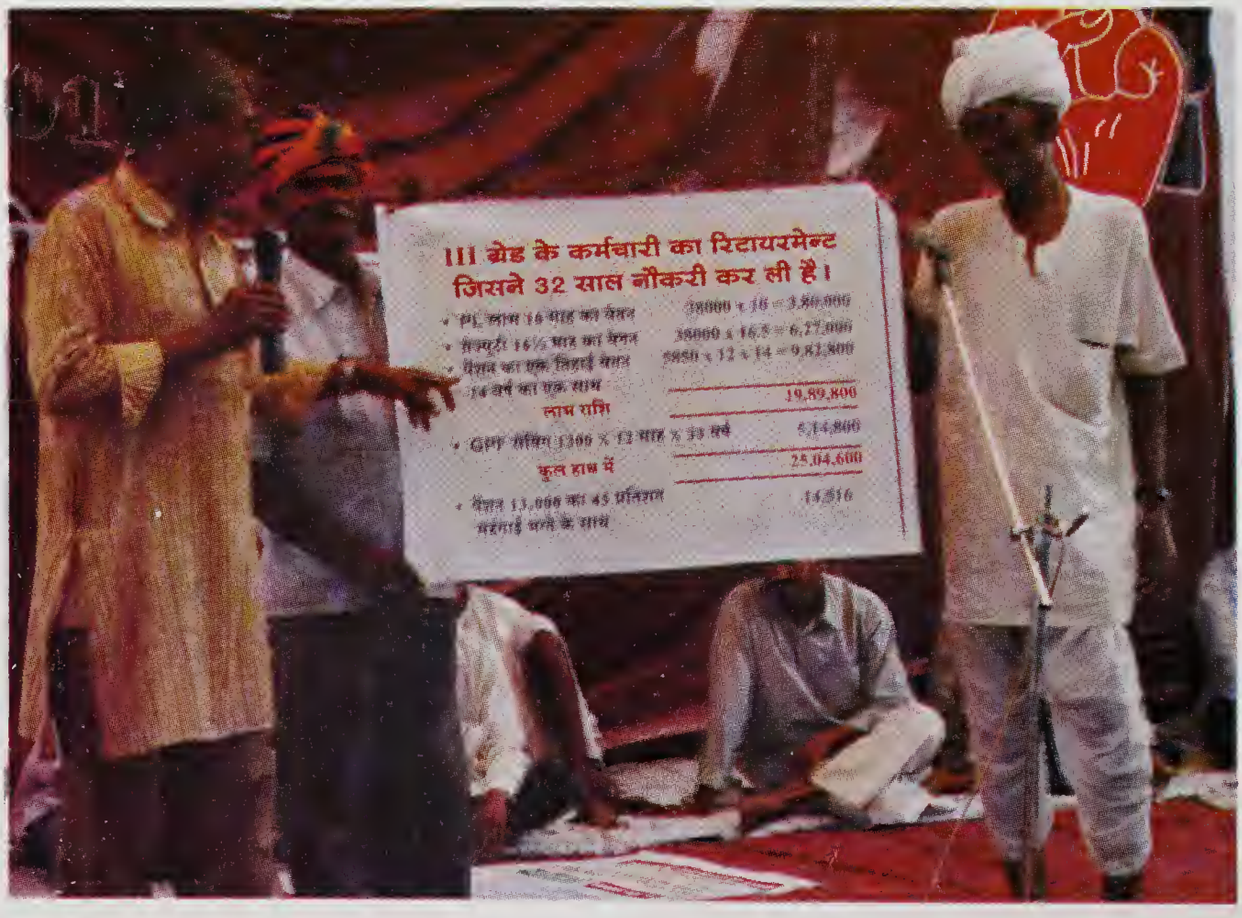
MKSS

Linking Grassroots Efforts with Policy

Efforts of a Non-Party Political Movement.

● Bharat Dogra

घोटाला
रथ यात्रा
स्वजाग


III ग्रेड के कर्मचारी का रिटायरमेन्ट
जिसने 32 साल नौकरी कर ली है।
• PL लाभ 16 माह का वेतन 28000 x 16 = 3,36,000
• इन्क्रीमेन्ट 16½ माह का वेतन 28000 x 16.5 = 6,27,000
• पेंशन का एक तिहाई वेतन 9850 x 12 x 14 = 9,82,800
14 वर्ष का एक साथ
लाभ राशि 19,89,800
• GPF शेष 1300 x 12 माह x 33 वर्ष 5,14,800
कुल हाथ में 25,04,600
• पेंशन 13,000 का 45 प्रतिशत 14,616
महंगाई भत्ते के साथ

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• Bharat Dogra

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This book is dedicated
to the memory of
Sh. Ajit Bhattacharya
Sh. Nikhil Chakravarti
&
Sh. Prabhash Joshi
eminent journalists who
helped and encouraged MKSS

About the author

Bharat Dogra, 55, started writing for reputed newspapers at the age of 16. Since then his over 6300 articles have appeared in most of the leading publications of India in English and Hindi. He has also written about 250 books and booklets. Almost all his writings have been on issues of public interest. He has received about 15 journalism awards. His reports released by news and features agencies have appeared in many countries. He has also written research reports for Action Aid, Oxfam, UNDP and other leading development organisations.

Bharat has travelled regularly to remote rural areas to report on the conditions of the poor and vulnerable sections there. He covered several people's movements at the times of crises, and was a member of human rights teams. He is a firm believer in peaceful movements for justice, equality and environment protection.

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Chapter 1

MKSS - How The RTI Journey Started

The post-independence period has seen a fast spread of voluntary organisations in India. While some of them have done very good work, even outstanding work which has opened up new paths, a widespread feeling has been that on the whole quantitative growth has not been matched by qualitative aspects. One manifestation of this has been that issues relating to ethics, transparency and code of conduct, even when raised from within these organisations, have not received the necessary attention. In fact some of those who persisted in raising these concerns had to face a lot of opposition from within these organisations.

A conviction started growing among some activists to explore alternative forms of social mobilisation and organisation. Another context was provided by the need to come out of the limits imposed by project-oriented work, so as to link up more closely with the wider social and political change.

During the late eighties three activists in Central Rajasthan were thinking along somewhat similar lines, although they had other concerns too. They knew for certain that they were not going to accept any institutional funds, and that they were going to live among

the rural poor more or less according to the norms of the people. They'll be accepting only the legal minimum wage rate for workers. This money they hoped to be able to raise from lectures, writings, small donations from friends etc.

These activists were also clear that they were not going to start a political party. The path they chose for themselves was broadly that of a 'non-party political process'. Although how exactly this will evolve was to be still seen in future with its several uncertainties, but this much was clear that this entire journey will be guided by several non-negotiable values such as commitment to the needs and aspirations of the poorest and weakest and rejection of discrimination and injustice based on caste, gender, race and religion.

Although these three activists thought for some time about moving to Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, their final decision was to continue to remain in Rajasthan where two of them already had experience of working for several years.

Only one of these activists was already well-known to the wider world. Aruna Roy's decision to resign from her Indian Administrative Services job (her resignation was accepted in 1975) had earlier attracted a lot of attention. Keeping in view her firm commitments to social justice, there were high expectations that she will use her position as a highly placed official to push these concerns as much as possible. But Aruna chose to come out of the limitations of this system and de-

vote her life more directly and explicitly to social concerns by working with the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), a voluntary organisation founded by her husband Bunker (Sanjit) Roy. Also known as the Barefoot College, the SWRC had initiated pioneering work in several areas and also raised wider issues relating to code of conduct within the voluntary sector.

Aruna made a very valuable contribution here for about eight years (1975-83), particularly in the mobilisation of (non-funded) women's groups in villages which remain a very strong part of the many-sided activities of SWRC. At a wider level, Aruna was increasingly involved in women's activities and other mobilisation particularly in Rajasthan (1983-87).

At the mid-career age of 40 most persons like to build on past strengths instead of venturing to entirely new areas. The reluctance is likely to be even greater when the new area is extremely uncertain and difficult. But Aruna Roy took this decision in 1986-87 to explore the path of a 'non-party political organisation'.

The second member of this team of three was Shankar (age 32 years in 1986-87). For Shankar too this was a difficult decision as after several years of moving from one uncertain, difficult job to another (in fact he recalls changing 17 jobs) he had just begun to settle down with some years of very creative work at the SWRC. It was here that his hitherto hidden genius as a communicator flowered in diverse art-forms including puppets, songs and street-plays. Shankar ac-

quired a reputation - which has continued to this date - of a communicator who talked about very serious issues very skillfully yet never missed a chance to spread joy and laughter among people and colleagues.

The more likely path for Shankar would have been to continue his stable job which was providing him enough creative outlets for his talents. The fact that he had a family to support made a big and uncertain change all the more difficult for Shankar. But ultimately he convinced his wife Anshi of the need for this change and the couple with their three children started preparing themselves for the more uncertain life ahead.

The youngest member of this team was Nikhil Dey, who had just turned 24 years in 1987. As a teenager he had always yearned to be a part of a wider social and political process of change. Even when he went to the USA for higher studies, his heart remained in this and he returned sooner than expected. Initial exposure to the political party process was disappointing for this young man of high ideals, and the conviction of working at the grassroots with workers and peasants became stronger day by day. It was with this idea that he went to several parts of the country and explored several options. He could barely speak a few words of Hindi initially but learned quickly. Ultimately things worked out with Aruna and Shankar and after several discussions the team of three, along with Anshi and three children, settled down in a hut of Dev Dungri village in Bhim sub-division of Udaipur district (now this village falls under Rajsamand district).

At that time young Nikhil could not have imagined that within the next two decades along with his colleagues he'll be able to make extremely important national level contributions, and so many youths will feel inspired by his example.

Aruna, Shankar and Nikhil had fairly wide age-difference and also different temperaments, but unity of purpose proved much stronger and they have been together since then through a succession of difficult challenges and complex problems as well as great achievements.

The choice of Dev Dungri was guided mostly by the fact that Shankar's sister had a spare hut here (her husband's family had settled in a different village) which could be used by these activists without incurring any expense. This was an area frequently exposed to droughts which meant that most rural families here badly needed drought-relief work or rural employment schemes. Most villages had OBCs (mostly Rawats) as the most predominant community followed by dalits and other castes. Due to frequent drought periods peasants were also reduced to workers in most cases - whether drought-relief workers or migrant workers is another matter.

Trying to understand the social-economic realities, the newly arrived social activists in Dev Dungri were initially in no hurry for quick actions. In this phase Aruna and Nikhil also found time to teach children at their home. However, these were difficult times for vil-

lagers and they themselves started coming to them with suggestions of what needed to be done.

However it was only in 1990 that the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathna was formally launched on May Day.

The three activists and their handful of initial supporters at that time were certainly keen to take up many good initiatives that the villagers of this area badly needed, but they could not have imagined what they'll be initiating soon (right to information campaign, social audits) will have such a great impact at the national level. This has turned out to be a classic case of a small beginning that achieved great things.

The right to information campaign and social audits grew so organically out of the initial struggles of the MKSS for the rights of poorest sections that the poor and illiterate people of the area could recognise the true worth of RTI and social audits better than even urban educated people. This was the true strength of the RTI movement in the MKSS region. It was a great achievement of MKSS that it could take forward this initiative to a national level and played a major role in getting some of the best talents at very senior levels (for example some of the senior journalists and the Press Council, senior academics and retired judges) together for a national campaign (NCPRI).

At a later stage when some persons tried to misrepresent the situation and tried to take almost all the credit for the RTI law in India, mistakenly presenting

some drafting (making some changes and additions in the several drafts that had already been prepared) as the entire RTI campaign, the MKSS did not even feel the need to challenge this misrepresentation, maintaining a dignified silence as the reality of the entire RTI process and movement in India is only too well known to the persons who were a part of this.

Later the MKSS also played an important part in the campaign for rural employment guarantee, as also in better implementation of this law. On the other hand, not so well known but no less valuable is the role the MKSS played in some local issues of Rajasthan such as a successful campaign (taken up in collaboration with other grassroots organisations) against the takeover of lakhs of acres of village commons for biofuel plantations and related measures.

More recently the contribution of the MKSS, working with NCPRI, in a reappraisal of the Jan Lokpal draft and presenting an alternative basket of anti-corruption measures was timely and valuable. It opened up new dimensions to a narrow, hurried debate driven more by rhetoric than reality.

22 years after its formal establishment and nearly 25 years after the informal beginning of this initiative, the MKSS can take legitimate pride in its many-sided and invaluable achievements. The achievements appear even bigger if we look at the admirable record of several youths who were associated with the MKSS for some time and then left to work in other areas, main-

taining close links and also carrying with them rich experiences of their association with the MKSS.

Despite all these achievements there is much more that the MKSS could have done in some important areas. While in some villages of MKSS work-area like Vijaypura, a lot of greening and water conservation effort has been successful, the MKSS would have liked to achieve this on a larger scale. After all, without such efforts the base for sustainable development will always be weak in this drought-prone area which is likely to face additional stress in these times of climate change. The deepening crisis of small farmers and the onslaught of big agribusiness on sustainable farming activities is an important area where the MKSS needs to give more attention. The spread of destructive and indiscriminate mining practices also needs to be checked. In this respect the MKSS has made only a small though significant beginning. It will not be easy to meet growing grassroots challenges given the growing attention demanded by national level issues and the limited number of full time activists the MKSS has been able to afford so far. (At present the MKSS has 17 full-time activists and it has a total annual budget of just Rs. 12 lakh or so, the bulk of which goes to provide the legal minimum wage to these full-time activists).

As some friends of MKSS feel strongly, the number of younger full-time activists needs to grow to respond adequately to the various challenges at the grassroots.

Chapter 2

Linking Grassroots Work to Policy Initiatives

In the case of many voluntary organisations the focus is generally on how efficient and honest use they make of the funds at their disposal to help the weaker sections, improve environment and take up other priority tasks. However in any region government funds are generally much higher than what an individual NGO, even a heavily funded NGO can spend. Therefore an even greater impact can be made if voluntary groups function in such a way as to ensure honest and proper use of government funds. If this vigilance is exercised particularly in the context of the funds meant mainly for the benefit of the weaker sections, then this can help to increase significantly the economic benefits reaching the weaker sections.

This contribution will be enhanced further if the process of exercising this vigilance and ensuring better use of public funds is such as to empower the people, particularly the weaker sections, in significant ways, so that the checking of misuse of funds is later followed by people's closer participation and involvement in development issues.

One organisation which has made a remarkable contribution to struggles for the better use of public funds is the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS - Organisation for the Empowerment of Workers and

Peasants). The MKSS works actively in six tehsils of Central Rajasthan (Bhim, Devgarh and Kumbhalgarh tehsils of Rajsamand district, Raipur tehsil in Pali district, Mandal tehsil in Bhilwara district, Jwaja tehsil in Ajmer district). This is a roughly 150 km long and 80 km wide area with a population of roughly half a million. The MKSS has worked in this area for over two decades. Its main office functions from one or two hutsor rooms in Devdungri village located at a distance of about 10 km from the town of Bhim.

The MKSS works mainly among the rural poor sections of this region, and its membership is also mainly drawn from these sections. However, the impact of MKSS work reaches much beyond this region, in some contexts it has a clearly state-wide impact (in most parts of Rajasthan) while some aspects of its work also has clear national impact in terms of legislation as well as inspiring similar efforts in distant parts of India. Some of its pioneering work in grassroots democratic initiatives has been widely discussed as a role model at international level.

In recent national initiatives on a wide range of crucial development and democracy issues, ranging from right to information to rural employment guarantee scheme to social audits, the contribution of the MKSS has been widely appreciated. In the case of the entire RTI (right to information) campaign in India, while many persons and organisations made an important contribution, but if we have to single out one organisation which made the most invaluable contri-

bution at grassroots, legislation and policy stage, then this credit goes to the MKSS (and its sister organisations). The same can be said about social audits.

A remarkable aspect of MKSS struggles has been their ability to link up quickly to wider efforts which have state-level and national-level impacts. Some of its local struggles are planned carefully keeping in mind policy changes which are clearly needed and whose benefits can reach a large number of vulnerable people. Its minimum wage struggles were linked to state-level policy changes that benefited the entire state. The demand for right to information clearly raised in its struggles quickly reached all over the state and then travelled to distant parts of the country as well. The way in which a small group of activists travelled from one part of Rajasthan to another dissseminating the message of right to information was an amazing example of how a small number of people with very few resources can have a wide impact with their dedication and convincing message.

It has surprised many people that the MKSS has been able to achieve so much without obtaining any institutional funds from outside sources. The MKSS has very modest funds to support just a handful of full-time activists (on legal minimum wage basis).

The enaction of national legislations on right to information and employment guarantee (year 2005) in India has been widely welcomed. In fact, both these laws have attracted a lot of interest outside India as.

well in the context of the wider debates on transparency and poverty alleviation. India's reputation as a vibrant, even if troubled, democracy has been strengthened by the enaction of these laws.

Apart from the widely debated content of these laws, what deserves attention is the campaign carried out by several grassroots organisations for enaction of national legislation on these two important issues. Although a number of grassroots organisations as well as special fora created for these campaigns no doubt contributed to the enaction of this legislation, the contribution of MKSS is particularly interesting and significant for two reasons.

Firstly, while the MKSS works on a regular basis in a relatively small area of Rajasthan, it has developed an amazing ability to link some of its local struggles with national-level campaigns. Secondly, it was able to sustain these campaigns for several years at a low budget. As the MKSS does not accept any institutional funds, it works necessarily on very low budgets and so its achievement is all the more significant.

In its initial years the MKSS struggled against rampant corruption in drought relief works (which play a very important role in the sustenance of people in the villages of Central Rajasthan where the MKSS works). The need to check this corruption led to the need for checking the records relating to these relief works (or other public works). This in turn led to the demand for right to information.

Those initial days were quite difficult. The move-

ment faced not only oppression but even ridicule. A small group of activists travelled from one part of Rajasthan to another and dharnas were organised in all districts of Rajasthan. The prolonged dharnas in the heat and dust of Rajasthan tested the patience of everyone. Yet there was plenty of song and dance, wit and humour in the campaign.

A source of strength for the activists of this incipient movement was the response their 'yatras' got in villages. It was amazing for many that peasants and workers, many of them illiterate, recognised the importance of the movement and extended their support.

Dharnas for right to information attracted a very wide diversity of people and groups. They mostly approached this right from the perspective of their own work. This further convinced MKSS activists of the wide relevance of this law.

Later when national level alliances were built it was this grassroots experience of MKSS activists which provided the basis for their leading role in the wider effort for laws relating to right to information.

The demand for employment guarantee also grew largely from the thinking within MKSS to find an effective solution for the increasingly desperate economic condition of villagers suffering from recurrent droughts in the main area of their work. As the MKSS took out its first yatras in villages to take this issue to people, they found ready and enthusiastic support. As Shankar, a senior activist of MKSS says, "In this case no explaining was needed. People intrinsically accepted

the importance of this law."

Once again MKSS was able to link up with a larger national campaign for rural employment guarantee legislation very efficiently and made a very important contribution to this national campaign.

An important aspect of MKSS campaign strategy is to call upon all democratic forces to make their contribution. Hence MKSS has developed good relationships, with many lawyers, academics, officials, legislators, and journalists. While emphasising grassroots struggles of the rural poor, the MKSS hasn't ignored the urban middle class as a source of support .

Nikhil Dey, leading activist of the MKSS, says, "The enaction of national level laws on right to information and rural employment guarantee is like a dream coming true". Most members and supporters of MKSS would readily agree with him.

Non-Party Political Organisation

In India the political process is identified generally as the work and domain of political parties. However increasingly it is important to speak about those political organizations which are not political parties.

What is the function and aim of political organisations? They are supposed to have an understanding and vision of the type of society they want, they take these views to the people and mobilise them along these lines. This mobilisation is possible in several ways. One obvious way is to try to capture State power and form a government. This is the path chosen by political

parties. However there can be – and there are – other political organisations which certainly mobilise people but not with the aim of capturing power. Their chosen path is to carefully identify the causes of distress and then mobilise people to fight these causes and reduce distress. Once this process is initiated, one effort leads to another effort, one struggle leads to another struggle, as the various problems of people and causes of distress are inter-linked.

While the power and reach of a political party, which either controls, or hopes to control one day, the massive state apparatus is immense, at the same time the lure of this power also creates some important problems and imposes some significant limitations on the mobilisational role of most political parties. In the case of most of the leading political parties in India, for instance, it can be seen clearly that the lure of this power attracts many self- centred people who cannot be expected to devote themselves to the real problems of people, most of whom are poor and exploited.

Secondly the over-concern, sometimes the sole concern, of the political parties with capturing power and forming their government generally pushes them in the direction of maintaining good relations with those who can provide them substantial funds. The same consideration motivates them not to disturb too much the existing balance of power.

This is where the special strengths of a people's political organisation which is not a political party are revealed. As there is no lure of power – now or in the

future – only those people are likely to join the organisation who are capable of raising themselves above the pursuit of self-interest linked with the gain of political power.

Politics is essentially about the balance of power, and today in most countries including India, the power is concentrated in a relatively small number of people and it is denied to a large number of poor and marginalised people. Hence one of the basic qualifications of relevant political process has to be to change the balance of power in favour of deprived sections. In terms of fulfilling this role, some non-party political organisations have a greater political relevance .

But to live up to this potential a people's non-party political organisation should not be constrained by government funding, corporate funding, and particularly in Indian conditions, foreign funding. This is why a distinction needs to be drawn from the frequently used word NGOs (whatever that means). When not accepting such institutional funds, non-party people's political organizations will necessarily have to keep their expenses as low as possible. At the time of hectic activities such as dharnas and mass meetings, extra funds will be needed which will have to be collected in a highly transparent way from various supporters and sympathisers of the movement and/or the organisation.

An inspiring example of such a non-party people's political organisation is the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathna (MKSS). Firmly rooted in village communities in central Rajasthan, this organisation due to its

exceptional work has faced increasing demands for wider intervention. It is now in the process of adjusting to this wider role, while retaining its strong community ties. However it is significant that while this movement was in the thick of a struggle for right to information which demanded that its leading activists had to travel considerably for a long time, spontaneous social reform work particularly anti-liquor work continued undisturbed in some village communities.

At a time of increasing scepticism about the possibilities of bringing broad-based social change, the experience of MKSS in Rajasthan has come as a ray of hope and an answer to sceptics. Within a short span of just two decades, this effort has brought about remarkable change in the lives of thousands of people, particularly in their consciousness regarding resisting injustice and struggling for the creation of a better world.

In many villages exposed to chronic distress conditions and consequent migration, the livelihood position of villagers has improved to some extent due to the improvement of rural employment works, a new determination to resist corruption, constructive activities like a network of fair price shops set up by workers and peasants themselves. What is even more significant is the emergence of a strong feeling of solidarity, of a sharing of joys and sufferings, of a community determined to change their world for the better by standing up with courage and patience to secure justice. Within a very short time the pioneering work undertaken by the MKSS has attracted nation-wide attention and im-

pressive linkages have been formed to integrate the work started here with national level campaigns.

One of the most important aspects of any endeavour for social change is its replicability. It is possible to pump in a lot of money into an area to show some signs of progress. But this process (even if we assume that this excess of money doesn't bring undesirable side-effects, which is unlikely!) cannot be replicated in other areas because so much money cannot be found for all areas. On the other hand, the MKSS offers an entirely different model where dependence on outside funds is almost entirely avoided and the emphasis is entirely on using the hidden potential of people themselves for initiating broad-based social change.

Chapter 3

The Beginning

The MKSS experiment started very modestly in 1987 when three social ectivists came to live in a hut in Dev Dungri village of Rajsamand (then Udaipur) district, about 10 kms away from the town of Bhim. This hut belonged to a relative of the husband and wife team of Shankar and Anshi, for whom it was a home-coming after working with a leading voluntary organisation Social Work and Research Centre (Barefoot College) for some time.

Shankar had already earned a well-deserved reputation as a master - communicator of great skill who could establish a close rapport with the audience even in very difficult situations. His special skills with puppets were a big help in this. A highly provocative puppet character frequently used by him (Moofat or Mr. Loudmouth) soon became one of the most identifiable symbols of MKSS gatherings.

This group also had young Nikhil Dey, who had given up his studies in the USA to search for a life pattern which could be of some help to the weaker sections and in addition would strengthen the overall process of relevant social change.

He travelled a lot in various parts of the country, particularly Rajasthan, searching for a more relevant and meaningful role.

Finally, this interesting, exceptionaly talented

group had Aruna Roy. Aruna had worked as an IAS officer for seven years before she resigned and devoted some years to the many-sided development and mobilisation activities at the Social Work and Research Centre. Then she spent some time exploring, experimenting with alternative forms of mobilisation. Finally in 1987-88 she teamed up with Shankar and Nikhil to explore the possibility of 'non-party political process'.

These activists decided that while striving to serve the poor, they will themselves live within the limits of a budget which is equivalent to the daily minimum wage paid by the state government (which was only Rs.15 per day at that time). In the rush of their idealism they sometimes carried this self imposed discipline to extreme limits – for two months they ate no vegetable other than 'ghiya' (bottle gourd) because during this period only this vegetable was cheap enough in the market to be affordable at the minimum wage levels.

Having reduced their personal needs to a minimum, these social activists could easily get a research project which while being useful in their social mobilisation work could also provide them the equivalent of minimum wages for six months to one year.

While this simplicity of their life- style and very transparent methods of finding their subsistence won the MKSS many admirers, what firmly established their roots among the people of the area where they started working was their decision to evolve their ideology and programme of action in close cooperation and interaction with the people of the area.

Some broad aspects of the ideology – a firm commitment to the poor and weaker sections, a strong resistance to communalism – were of course clear from the outset. But the precise way in which the problems of the poor should be taken up, the issues and struggles which will be prioritised – all these decisions came not from any preconceived notions of social change but from a process of remaining close to the ground reality as reflected in the views of the members and sympathisers of MKSS spread in many villages.

It was because the programmes of action were rooted among the people themselves that even new innovative programmes could spread rapidly in the area. While some city-based observers found such programmes a bit awkward as these did not fit their set notions of social change, the new programmes could spread quite easily among villagers themselves because these had evolved in response to their own needs.

Another strength of MKSS has been to try to involve a wide cross-section in the process of social change. In MKSS movements, the strong grassroots efforts of peasants and workers are supported by city based campaigners, academics and media – persons known to be sympathetic to the weaker sections. Senior government officials who are known to have the interests of the poor at heart are also contacted and informed about the aims of the movement.

MKSS has been involved in many movements and protests, but it also balances this path of struggle

by undertaking many constructive activities (such as starting fair price shops and schools). MKSS protest movements even in times of tension and uncertainty have a lot of song and dance to celebrate the struggles of people. MKSS has always emphasised the mobilisation of women, who participate in its movements in large numbers. While MKSS believes firmly in the equality of women, it sees social reform as something that should involve the community closely instead of imposing alien, urban, upper class views on villagers.

The very first struggle of this group involved a clash with a tyrant feudal lord of Sohangarh village who had illegally encroached a lot of public land. The struggle to release 25 hectares of land from his encroachment for giving livelihood suppot to rural poor families involved some very tense moments, such as when the landlord unleashed armed gangsters on villagers and social activists, but finally the control of the land went to a committee of village women. Pursuing its policy of combining struggle with constructive work, the movement obtained a project from the Wasteland Development Board for further afforestation on this land. Today despite efforts to damage this greenery, this project stands as a model of afforestation and water-conservation from where a large number of villagers meet their fuel and fodder needs. Following this success the formation of the MKSS was formally announced at Bhim on May 1, 1990.

Chapter 4
Struggle For Minimum Wages (Phase I)

From the very beginning the MKSS has given a lot of attention both to securing a rise in legal minimum wages as well as ensuring the actual payment of the legal wages. The contribution of payment of reasonable legal wages to the food security of workers is high everywhere, but it is even higher in Rajasthan due to the significant role played by drought relief work and rural employment works in the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable sections. MKSS has given the highest importance to ensuring the payment of legal wages at drought relief work sites. Before the work of MKSS started, another movement led by activists of Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) had raised the demand for payment of legal minimum wages at drought relief work sites and this demand was taken up by the SWRC director Bunker Roy right up to the Supreme Court of India which gave a very favourable judgement ensuring the rights of workers at drought relief work sites to get the legal minimum wage.

However in reality the legal minimum wage was still not being paid at most drought relief work and in rural emplyment works.

In 1990 the MKSS launched a movement against

violation of minimum wage laws in rural employment works in the Bhim region culminating in a hunger strike-cum-dharna. Despite the administratioin's heavy handed methods, the movement succeeded in drawing attention to the issue of non-payment of minimum wage at rural employment works.

This struggle was followed up by a two-day seminar on "minimum wages in government's rural employment programmes" organised at the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur. Senior officials, academics and social workers who participated in this seminar expressed their agreement that minimum wages should be paid in all government sponsored employment works including famine relief works, and that too, within a week of completion of the muster-roll.

This meeting further strengthened the struggle of the MKSS for legal minimum wages. In Barar panchayat area when workers found that legal minimum wages were not being paid, they refused to accept lower than this legal wage. When economic hardship later compelled many of them to accept the lower wage, still the struggle was continued by 12 workers who despite many hard-ships refused to accept anything less than the legal minimum wage.

Officials were quite willing to make off-the-record payments to these workers at the legal rate, but the workers insisted that legal wage should be made on the record because only then will the wider struggle for legal wages be helped. To obtain this payment on

record, the MKSS had to resort to another dharna cum fast in Bhim.

The government now unleashed its repressive machinery on the agitating workers and those who were on hunger strike were carried away forcibly by police-men. However finally the government had to yield and pay the legal minimum wages on record.

This helped the struggles at other famine relief works also to demand and receive the legal wage. Earlier the government was trying to take the stand that legal minimum wage will not be paid at famine relief work. Now having made this payment on record it was much more difficult to deny this wage to other workers at thousands of other famine relief work sites all over Rajasthan.

The impact of this could be seen sometime after this struggle at numerous other work sites. Even if the exact legal wage was not paid, the real wage now was much closer to the legal wage.

Reports from several affected villages all over Rajasthan during the drought of 2000-01 revealed that although at a few places such as Nokha there were some glaring violations, by and large there was a greater tendency for the wages to be closer to legal wages than in previous years of widespread drought. Although several forces both within and outside the government have contributed to this, there is no doubt that the work of MKSS and allied organisations made a special contribution and a state-level impact.

In the course of these struggles MKSS activists realised again and again that to ensure proper payment of wages it is important to be able to inspect muster rolls and related documents, a realisation which led to the demand for right to information.

Chapter 5
Public Hearings Expose Corruption

A highly effective method of fighting corruption at the grassroots that has been evolved in Rajasthan by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana (MKSS) is that when people of any village feel concerned that a lot of funds in their village are being misappropriated, they approach the appropriate authorities for obtaining official information on the development work that has been taken up in this village or panchayat area (information such as the total budget, how much of it was spent on purchasing material and how much was spent on making payments to workers, the measurements of the work etc.).

Once this information becomes available then people examine all the development works that are supposed to have been completed. The actual work is compared to what is stated in official records. Workers whose names are mentioned in the records are contacted to ask them whether they were actually paid the wages that are shown in the official records. Once this detailed comparison of the real situation with the official records has been completed it is time to call a public hearing or a Jan Sunwai. At this public hearing all villagers are invited including those who are accused of corruption. The local officials, journalists, some teachers etc. are also invited. Some eminent persons of the

area as well as some from outside the area are also invited as panelists. The official records are read out and villagers are asked to tell the real situation. The misappropriation of funds is generally established very clearly and in a very open way before all those who are present. The persons who are accused of corruption are given full opportunity to present their point of view. It is another matter that they have little to say when the contrast between what is stated in official records and what the villagers say (and what can be verified in nearby sites) is so clear.

The first public hearing took place at Kot Kirana village (in Pali district) on 2nd December 1994. This public hearing exposed how people shown to be employed in construction of anicuts were not even living in the area then. The wage money did not reach the villagers and the anicuts were so badly constructed and they were washed away by rains. Thus food security was harmed both in the short-term (by the non-payment of wages) and in the long run (by the denial of a badly needed irrigation source).

The second public hearing held at Bhim block in Rajsamand district took up matters relating to Bhim and Kaladeo panchyats. Kaladeo panchayat had been publicised for its numerous development works constructed under a rural development scheme called 'apna-gaon apna-kaam' (our village, our work). However, most of the work tuned out to be full of problems and could not be used. An anicut was found to be full of leaks. Although this special scheme aimed at

maximising the involvement of local people , actually only contractors and a few influential people were involved. This public hearing also found that in Bhim block, payments amounting to over rupees three million had been made to a fraudulent company which existed only in the form of a bank account in the name of the wife of a block-level employee!

It was becoming clear right from these initial public hearings that a lot of money which could have helped particularly the weaker sections and enhanced their food security was being cornered by a few influential persons.

MKSS activists also went to several other areas to help in organising other public hearings. In Alwar, a public hearing was held on the unfair means being used to grab highly fertile farmland for setting up industrial units, particularly hazardous units and units to produce liquor. In the course of the organisation of these public hearings, it became increasingly clear that right to information is extremely important for exposing corruption. With the availability of people's right to obtain information, the effectiveness of such public hearings in exposing how development funds were being misappropriated increased further. In fact the workers and peasants of this region understood and demonstrated the usefulness of right to information in protecting livelihood interests much before the city based intellectuals woke up to the importance of this issue.

The moral force of MKSS campaign and public hearings also increased to such an extent that at some

jan-sunwais the main persons who faced charges of corruption agreed on the spot to return the money (or at least a part of the misappropriated funds). In Surajpura, Rawatmal and Kukarkheda villages, for instance, the sarpanches agreed to return over rupees one lakh each. However higher officials discouraged the Kukarkeda sarpanch from returning the money.

The biggest exposure took place in the public hearing for Janawad panchayat (Rajsamand district). Here the careful scrutiny of a part of the development work during six years revealed a massive corruption of Rs. 45 lakhs. This exposure motivated the government to set up its own detailed inquiry headed by a senior official Shri Bannalal. The Bannalal Committee after a more complete review of the development work in Janawad panchayat during six years revealed corruption and misappropriation of Rs. 67 lakhs out of the total spending of Rs. 123 lakhs. Such a huge corruption and misappropriation was confirmed despite giving the benefit of doubt to officials/sarpanch in some important contexts. It became clear that the people of these villages particularly the weaker sections had been deprived of irrigation, drinking water, wage payments, health, education, housing and other basic needs because of this corruption. Their crops were drying up due to shortage of irrigation while the money meant for small-scale irrigation and water harvesting works was being swindled. Women had to walk up to 3 or 4 km to bring drinking water while the money meant for water tanks was being misappropriated and a public well was being used for the private benefit of one of the biggest

land-owners. The poorest people were being deprived of shelter while several members of one of the richest families were grabbing houses meant for poor families. As many as 49 development works (out of the 141 examined by the committee) simply did not exist or existed only on paper (so that 100 per cent of the money shown in official records for these works had been misappropriated.

What is very clear from the experience is that Jan-Sunwais and Right to Information can be very useful in fighting corruption as well as in securing the close involvement of people in protecting their rights as symbolised by the slogan of 'Hamara paisa, hamara hisaab' (be accountable to us, it is our money).

As a document prepared by MKSS says, "All over Rajasthan hundreds of thousands of small development works have been undertaken in the name of the poor, e.g., roads, schools, wells, tanks and all kinds of construction activities. The main beneficiaries of these schemes, however, are not the poor but a mafia of contractors, bureaucrats and village leaders who are looting public funds for private gain. This is also the basis of a fraudulent nexus between development works and the electoral system, whereby local leaders are allowed to misuse public funds in return for delivering votes. The casualty is not just development but also democracy.

During the jan sunwai, the people have an opportunity to openly question the use and misuse of development funds in the area, and to initiate action

against any fraud that may be identified."

Further this paper says, "This exercise has several objectives :

1. Reclaiming Development : Though the jan sunwai the people assert their right to the proper use of development funds, and demand accountability from elected representatives and officials.

2. Fighting Corruption : The jan sunwai is a weapon to eradicate corruption at the village level.

3. Building Democracy : The jan sunwai is a practical exercise in government for the people by the people, without the inter-mediation of political parties or elected leaders. It is a small step towards the transition from representative to participatory democracy."

"The jan sunwai is also part of a broader movement for the people's right to information. It is an example of the tools that can be used to assert the right of all citizens to transparent and accountable government. In the current climate of pervasive corruption, the right to information campaign is one opportunity for ordinary citizens to break out of the vicious circle of collective apathy and individual hopelessness. (From a document 'Public Hearing - Why and How by MKSS)

In a report on jan sunwai at Surajpur village eminent journalist Ajit Bhattarcharjee captured very well the spirit of these public hearings. "At the Surajpura sunwai, the most flagrant case to emerge was of the non-existent irrigation channel. Copies of bills, receipts, muster rolls and other documents showed that Rs.

56000 had been paid for constructing a channel from a nearby lake. This included payment of wages to 100 workers. But local villagers testified that no such channel existed and nobody had been paid. The offending sarpanch offered to make amends if the exact amount defrauded was determined.

"Despite the serious nature of the charges, the proceedings were conducted democratically, without angry confrontation. The sarpanches were seated on chairs facing the villagers who walked up to a dais to testify. They were allowed to respond without heckling. Everyone had their say. A panel of notables from outside witnessed the proceedings.

"Customary politeness, however did not indicate acceptance or leniency. When the non-existent channel was exposed, the villagers were asked if they wanted a case to be filed. They shouted their assent - asked to raise hands, most of hands went up. The traditional servility before officaldom had disappeared.

"Jan sunwais are an exercise in village democracy. As details are read out from copies of official record of a panchayat work, the assembled villagers are asked to confirm them. One by one they come forward to testify to fraud from what they have seen themselves. Women do not hesitate to testify. Nor do labourers in patched clothes. And all this in the presence of powerful sarpanches.

"Muster rolls provide the most striking and immediate evidence of fraud. They contain names of persons listed as having been paid the stipulated wages

for work on the project. At both jan sunwais, as the names were read out, villagers stood up to testify that many of those named were dead, working elsewhere or were no longer residents in the area. Some confirmed that they had worked and had been paid, but not the stipulated wage. Charging for non-existent labour has become the simplest form of corruption and of defrauding the poor of employment benefits."

As the right to information movement has spread to many parts of Rajasthan, its impact can also be seen at the state level, particularly in the execution of drought relief works. A study of the drought relief work by Jean Dreaze, carried out with the help of several voluntary organisations and people's movements revealed a significant deduction in corruption levels. A substantial part of the credit for this should rightly go to the Right to information - Jan sunwai campaign pioneered by MKSS and later joined by several other organisations. Any reduction in corruption in drought relief work should certainly be regarded as a very important contribution to enhancing food security in Rajasthan.

This campaign has played an important role in reducing corruption in development works. When a successful jan sunwai is organised, its impact can be seen in several nearby villages as well. Corrupt officials and elected representatives realise that if they go on swindling people then one day they may also have to face people in similar public hearings and then the government is also likely to initiate action against them. So they become more careful about the use of funds and

even if corruption is not altogether eliminated more benefits start reaching the people than before.

In brief, what the MKSS achieved in a short time is a strong message to the entire nation that if the benefit of development funds is to really reach the rural poor, then much remains to be done first to clear the cobwebs of corruption. This is a significant message at a time when a lot of hope is being reposed in panchayats. If the message of MKSS is heard, then a lot of attention will be devoted to creating systems which will ensure honesty and transparency in the functioning of panchayats. More of this saving will directly benefit the poor, their ability to meet their basic needs and their food security. When a sarpanch indulges even in relatively small scale corruption, it actually continues to get bigger as money has to be given also to several officials. When half of the money is stolen from a development work, actually almost the entire amount is gone as the construction is so poor as to be almost entirely useless. Hence the loss to the villagers, for example from corruption in the construction of small irrigation check-dams, is actually much higher than the money cornered by a corrupt sarpanch. For the sake of enriching a few persons, the development work of an entire village or hamlet may be jeopardised. The system of accountability and transparency suggested by the MKSS shows the way to check corruption and ensure honest use of public funds.

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Chapter 6

Towards Right to Information

The difficult and prolonged process of several anti-corruption struggles convinced the MKSS that one of the most effective methods of fighting village-level corruption is to provide people the right to obtain copies of official records (such as muster rolls, bills and vouchers) relating to rural development, welfare and anti-poverty programmes implemented in their areas. This soon became a central point in the demands being raised by MKSS. Several other organisations were also quick to appreciate the potential of obtaining this 'right to information' and it began to appear that this demand raised by MKSS will have state-level or perhaps even national-level impacts.

This feeling was strengthened in 1995 when in his budget speech made on April 5 the Chief Minister of Rajasthan Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat declared that he would allow photo copying of all records on development expenditure, at the Panchayat level, for a fee. He further said that this right to information will cover development expenditure going back to five years. If irregularities are indicated then, the CM promised, there will be a proper inquiry into this and illegally obtained money will be recovered from corrupt persons.

This was a major step forward in the efforts to obtain the right to information for checking village-level corruption, particularly as nothing like this had been

promised earlier by the Chief Minister of any other state in India. While waiting for the promise of the CM to take practical shape, the MKSS quietly continued the work to consolidate these gains, continuing the public hearings and the follow-up work on them. It also stepped up efforts to establish state level and national level linkages with other activist groups, lawyers, officials and media persons so that the struggle for the right to information could be broadened. This finally took the shape of state level and national campaigns for right to information in which MKSS activists played a significant role.

However, the state government continued to delay issuing orders on the promise made by the CM, despite repeated demands made by MKSS. MKSS decided that if the relevant orders are not issued till one year, then it is time to initiate a movement on this demand. So it decided to start an indefinite dharna in Beawar town on April 6, 1996 exactly a year after the promise made by the CM. Fearing a political fallout of this dharna at election time, the state government quickly issued a half-hearted order on the right to information which fell far short of the original promise made by the Chief Minister.

MKSS members argued that while providing for inspection of records and noting down details, the orders did not include photocopying of relevant records. This not only created problems for illiterate or near illiterate persons, in addition the legal validity of the information written down by hand was doubtful. The order was silent on the period within which records would be

available, as also the number of records that may be inspected for the fee specified in the order. It also did not specify how delaying tactics on the part of reluctant officials could be avoided, or how illegally diverted money will be recovered and refunded to villagers. On all these accounts this order failed to do justice to the original promise made by the CM. Therefore, after seeing the order the MKSS decided to continue the dharna which continued for nearly six weeks. From May 6 (a month after it started) it was also extended to Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan.

While it was only to be expected that this dharna will attract MKSS members from villages, what came as quite a surprise was that it also obtained very enthusiastic participation of the citizens of Beawar town, many of whom had earlier not even heard of MKSS. These supporters ranged from editors and political leaders to vegetable vendors and daily wage workers. Some workers donated a part of their daily earnings while some vegetable vendors donated regular supplies of potatoes and tomatoes. Some photographers provided their services free while the tent shop charged only one third of its normal rate. Several rival trade unions forgot their differences for the time being to extend joint support to the dharna.

The dharna was withdrawn in mid-May only after the state government constituted a high power committee to look into the practical aspects of implementing the Right to Information.

There was no rest for the MKSS activists, how-

ever, as the dharna was followed by a series of meetings on follow-up action and legislation on the Right to Information. As the Rajasthan government delayed implementing the Right to Information, jan sunwais and dharnas were started again to pressurise the government for implementing the Right to Information in its proper spirit and also for taking suitable action, including recovery of funds in cases of corruption which had already been exposed in previous jan sunwais.

In 1997 MKSS organised a series of dharnas to urge the Rajasthan government to implement the right to information. These dharnas were organised in all the divisional headquarters of Rajasthan. Kavita Srivastava, who made a significant contribution to this effort says, "The dharnas and meetings evoked a good response in almost all parts of Rajasthan." These culminated in a 53-day protest dharna at Jaipur which attracted national attention.

The state government issued significant orders in terms of making village panchayats transparent. To ensure that these do not merely remain on paper, MKSS activists and other social activists in various parts of Rajasthan tried to obtain various documents from panchayats.

At a time when the right to information campaign is spreading to many parts of the world, a special strength of the Indian experience is how - thanks largely to MKSS - it was closely linked up with the struggles of the weakest sections.

MKSS was involved in the movement for minimum wages of workers at relief work sites in a drought prone area, and it was in the course of this struggle that the importance of information right was realised.

Poor peasants got the strength and the confidence to go to meet the highest officials (they even went to meet the President of India who received them most cordially) because they had realised the importance of this right while breaking stones in the parched land of their drought affected villages.

Chapter 7

National Law on Right to Information

Soon it became apparent from the large-scale response to the demand for Right to Information that this was an idea whose time had came. There were numerous campaigns for state lavel laws as well as for national legislation. Infact laws had been enacted in several states before the national level legislation was passed. An organisation which played a key role in all this mobilisation was the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI). The MKSS played a very important role in starting this effort and ever since then its contribution to NCPRI has remained very significant. At present Nikhil Dey is one of the co-conveners of the NCPRI and he, along with Aruna Roy and Shekhar Singh (a former and very successful convener of NCPRI) has made a very important contribution to the recent initiatives on Lokpal.

India's national law on RTI has been widely praised at the international level as a strong and effective law. However not so well known in the fact that the initial drafts prepared by not just the government but even some of the civil society groups were very weak and had a much narrower scope. However several individuals and organisations played a very important role in taking the debate to a point where strong, effective

national level law became a reality. Among these organisation, the role of NCPRI and MKSS was particularly important.

For some time the Press Council under the leadership of Justice Sawant became the focal point for the draft of a suitable national law on RTI. But even after this draft was ready, many other consultations, redraftings and inter-actions with the government were needed. The efforts continued right up to presentation before the Standing Committee of the Parliament. In fact several important amendments were actually introduced at this stage.

Without a continuing campaign till the very last stages the achievement of a strong and effective RTI law would not have been possible. Many individuals and organisations made an important contribution to this long process. It was a joint democratic effort involving many people and groups spent over the vast area of India. In all this the contribution of MKSS and the NCPRI was particularly significant. The MKSS also brought to the national effort the moral force of demand for right to information being rooted in the struggles of workers and drought-affected small and marginal farmers.

While the government rightly deserves credit for the enaction of good RTI law, it cannot be said that this legislation did not have any problems or loopholes. Some problems still remained and the MKSS/NCPRI were conscious of the need for some important reforms.

However the government's thinking about changes in the law related not to strengthening or widening it, but to diluting it in some important ways. For example, the government was keen to keep away file-notings from the coverage of RTI.

When it became clear that the government was about to introduce regressive amaendments in the right to information law, the NCPRI with the help of other organisations launched a strong and successful campaign to oppose and check this. Once agains the MKSS made an important contribution to this campaign.

Enaction of good law is an important achievement but it can play an effective role at the national level only when most people in the country know about this law and its potential. This is particularly true in a vast country like India with its relatively low levels of literacy. Here again the MKSS members made an important contribution. Shankar Singh and his companions with their songs and puppets made the entire effort a joyful one. Several MKSS activists like Kheemaram used RTI extensively to expose many-sided corruption and irregularties. Many jan sunwais made full use of the information now available by using RTI.

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Chapter 8

Fighting Inflation

While many social activists only protest against inflation, MKSS has gone one step ahead to actually set up fair-price shops of its own which sell good quality goods of everyday use. The first such shop was opened in Bhim 20 years back and this has been followed since then by some other shops at Sujanpura, Jawaja, Todgarh and Vijaypura.

The effort concentrated on reduced retail margins and quality control to provide good quality goods at lower prices. It was decided that since those who ran the shop were dedicated MKSS activists, they would take no more than the legal minimum wage. Incidentally, the senior-most members of MKSS also get the same wage.

Other members of the MKSS also helped to ensure that high quality was maintained by personal supervision of the grinding and cleaning work. The activists, unlike other shopkeepers, insisted on absolute purity.

A special effort was made to avoid adulteration in products such as spices. The success can be judged from the fact that some neighbouring shopkeepers also come to this shop for purchasing spices for their own families.

Predictably, the response of the consumers has been very favourable. The news of the good quality and

low prices spread rapidly, first among MKSS sympathisers, and then among other people as well. A high turnover within a short time enabled the new venture to meet its target of being able to function at a margin of just one per cent.

The new shop not only sold products at a cheaper rate, it also announced its low prices over a loud-speaker. Thus in a market where many buyers were illiterate, the shop's low rates were communicated to potential customers. This was greatly resented by other traders who then petitioned the collector to take action against the new shop. When they failed to evoke a satisfactory response from officialdom, they set up a loud music system near the shop to drown out the announcements of the rate-list.

This, however, had the opposite effect. Several shoppers, attracted by the loud music, came closer and eventually found out about the new shop next door as well.

The result was that the MKSS venture succeeded in bringing down the market rates to some extent as other retailers were forced to cut their high margins to compete with them. Soon after the first shop at Bhim was started, retail prices of edible oils, gur and sugar were observed to have been reduced in other shops as well.

MKSS has emphasised strengthening the public distribution system from the very beginning. At a time when the public distribution system's ability to pro-

vide subsidised food to the poor is being eroded, the MKSS has tried though various means to check this erosion. To provide better services to the people of Devdungri village as well as to closely study the problems in honest functioning of PDS, MKSS decided to run a public distribution outlet or a ration shop on its own. While the aim of better serving local villagers was realised, MKSS also learnt about the problems that hinder the honest functioning of ration shops.

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Chapter 9
Wider Struggle Against Famine

During the year 2001-2002 Rajasthan faced an acute drought and reports of starvation conditions and acute drinking water shortage poured in from several parts of the state. In this situation a network of about 57 voluntary organisations called Akal Sangharash Samiti (AKS-famine struggle committee) played a very important role. The AKS closely monitored the drought situation not only on the basis of information received from voluntary organisations but also by examing the documents of the government regarding how much employment has been provided. AKS carried out a constant dialogue with the government regarding the need to step up employment works and increase the allocation of government funds. This constant monitoring and pressure helped to increase the employment provided in drought relief work and the extension of relief work by about 3 months.

While this work involved about 57 organisations, MKSS again made a significant contribution in this effort. Particularly in the last stage when an extension of relief works was badly needed, hectic consultations with senior officials and ministers in Delhi conducted by MKSS activists proved very useful. This was also followed by some national level changes which again took

some of the benefits to other parts of the country as well. MKSS activists focused a lot of attention on the contradictions between mounting grain stocks and the widespread hunger and malnutrition in the country, and how it is necessary to resolve this contradiction by releasing adequate quantities of this grain for people who need it the most.

The experience with struggling for people's subsistence needs time and again in all-too-frequent droughts in the main work area of Rajasthan gradually increased the conviction within the MKSS for the need of some form of rural employment guarantee scheme.

The MKSS was keenly involved in organising public hearings on hunger and food rights which were addressed by former Prime Minister (and a close friend of MKSS) V.P. Singh, Amartya Sen and Jean Dreaze.

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Chapter 10

Towards Rural Employment Guarantee

Against the background of growing economic distress and tensions in rural India, there was increasing demand for the enactment of a rural employment guarantee law in India. Several organisations had begun campaigning for this. In Rajasthan the contribution of the MKSS was particularly important. In fact the demand for such a law had particular rélevance in the context of the more drought-prone villages of central Rajasthan where the MKSS worked. So once this issue was raised as a priority issue within the organisation, there was very wide support for this and mobilisation around this demad was quite rapid.

The year 2004 saw a big escalation in the campaign for rural employment guarantee and this was evident in the annual 'May day' gathering of MKSS members in Bhim. Earlier in late April MKSS had worked closely with other organisations to organise marches and meetings in support of rural employment guarantee legislation.

With its well-established ability to link up local campaigns with national mobilisation, the MKSS had an important presence in the national efforts for rural employment guarnatee including a 'national rural employment yatra' which involved about 150 organisations for a bus yatra which covered a vast part of the country.

This culminated in a 'jan mach' or 'people's forum' in Delhi which raised their demand for rural employment very frequently. MKSS representatives were closely involved in the protracted negotiations with government officials on the finer details of this legislation.

Jean Dreaze, the famous activist-economist, played a key role in the drafting of this law. He is an old friend of MKSS who visited the MKSS 'headquarters' at Devdungri village several times, fetching water, cutting firewood and of course helping in the academic work. The campaign for rural employment guarantee found the MKSS again working closely with him and his colleagues like Reetika Khera. The improvement of public distribution system has been another area of close cooperation.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was enacted in 2005. However in the first two years the NREGA was not implemented in the core work area of MKSS (as per the decision on a phased introduction in the country). However MKSS worked in other parts of Rajasthan (for example Dungarpur district) in close cooperation with other organisations like Aasthaa for the successful implementation of this scheme. Later as the law was extended to the entire country, MKSS became more intensely involved for the succesful implementation of this important law.

The earlier experience of MKSS in estabilshing transparent systems and conduct of public hearings proved very useful in this. The concept 'nyari napti nyari rate' or fair wage payment in keeping with the work

actually done (and measured) was sought to be implemented in a practical way.

In Vijaypura panchayat (Rajsamand district) where MKSS members Kaluram Salvi and Rukmani Salvi were elected as sarpanch in close succession, MKSS made a successful attempt to implement NREGA properly. Here very good assets could be created to meet water conservation and other development needs and the workers were properly paid on the basis of 'nyari napti nyari rate' and they could get the full quota of 100 days' work. Transparant systems were established and social audit was conducted properly as per the legal requirements.

MKSS activists travelled widely to investigate complaints in the implementation of NREGA and to spread awareness about its proper functioning. MKSS first made efforts to organise a regular dialogue of villagers and activists with the state government regarding the implementation of NREGA. When this demad was accepted, MKSS kept making efforts for the success of such inter-actions which have proved very useful.

The next step was to organise trade unions of NREGA workers. A lot of effort has already been made to form such a trade union but denial/delays in registration created some unforseen hurdles. MKSS also helped in the training of mates so that NREGA can be implemented properly.

Chapter 11
Social Audits

Right from its earlist days the MKSS has according very high priority to setting up transparent systems of decentralised governance. So when in year 2000 the Rajasthan government introduced reforms like setting up ward sabhas with provision of social audits, such reforms were welcomed by MKSS. But making laws is one thing and implementation is another. To ensure proper implementation MKSS and its companion organisations worked hard to familiarise more and more people with the method and the potential of social audits.

Again in year 2002 when the government took the decision to conduct social audits in selected panchayats which had incurred the highest expenditure, the MKSS participated in some of these social audits like those is Bagaur, Lasani, Baaghana, Farara and Jhalon Ki Madaar. In 2006 MKSS made an important contribution to the campaign for social audits in Dungarpur (in the specific context of NREGA) district which covered nearly 800 villages with the participation of nearly 165 organisations from various parts of India. This effort included a social audit footmarch. This was followed by other important social audit campaigns and efforts in places like Bagidaura, Jhalawar and Karauli.

In year 2009 a 12-day social audit march was

organised in 381 panchayats of Bhilwara district. These social audits exposed large-scale corruption in the procurent and purchase of materials. A lot of money was also recovered, FIRs were lodged at 22 places.

Vested interests felt threatened by the growing success of social audits in unearthing corruption and social audit teams were attacked in Jhalawar and opposed in Banswara district. However a new source of strength for the efforts of MKSS and like minded organisations was that a joint forum of 52 such organisations could be formed called Soochna Aur Rojgar Abhiyan (SRA), Rajasthan. This unity helped these organisations to continue their important work despite all the opposition by vested interests, just as the formation of a RTI Manch had been useful.

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Chapter -12

Strengthening Panchayat Raj

Apart from relentlessly fightiing corruption in panchayat raj institutions, MKSS has also campaigned successfully for taking decentralisation to the entire village in such a way that all people can participate. This is generally taken to mean the strengthening of the gram sabha, the assembly of all adult villagers but there are several functional problems in this particularly when a big village is spread over a large area. So MKSS campaigned for creating a new statutory institution of direct democracy called ward sabha. A ward is the smallest constituency of the local government in India, comprising a few hundred people usually in contiguous settlements, who elect a member of the village council. This legal recognition of a smaller, face to face community is likely to prove quite helpful in ensuring functional democracy at the grassroots.

MKSS also campaigned for ensuring better representation of women and weaker sections at gram sabha and ward sabha meetings. MKSS tried to ensure that ward sabhas have the right to get information on all development work implemented in their respective areas and to conduct social audits regarding these development works. The MKSS demanded that ward sabhas should be authoriosed to award utilisation and completion certificates for such work.

To a significant extent some of these demands of MKSS were accepted and MKSS followed up this by working to ensure the successful functioning of these

reforms at least in some panchayats. In fact in year 2000 elections two panchayats Kushalpura (in Rajsamand district, sarpanch Narayan) and Todgarh (Ajmer District, sarpanch Tej Singh) efforts were made to develop these as model panchayats. Here MKSS activists were elected as sarpanches. Already these panchayats have attracted attention for honest implementation of drought relief work/rural employment works and for their open and transparent functioning Earlier good work had been initiated in Thana panchayat (Bhilwara) by sarpanch Ladu Singh, a member of MKSS.

At the time of panchayat elections the MKSS started mobilising several honest candidates to make a common declaration that if elected they'll work with complete integrity and set up a fully transparent system of functioning. In addition these candidates agreed to incur minimum election expenses (well within the legal norms) and also to stay away from all other malpractices.

In year 2005 MKSS activists Kaluram Salvi was elected from Vijaypura panchayat (Rajsamand district). He set up a system of transparent functioning and proper functioning of NREGA in which all the legal requirements were fulfilled at the grassroots. Workers here got full 100 days employment and exceptionally good development work was implemented.

Kaluram's initiative to paint all essential information on panchayat walls impressed the Rajasthan Chief Minister who issued instructions for similar wall-writing in other panchayats.

Kaluram's work is now being continued by the

present-day sarpanch, Rukmani Salvi. Helped by her husband Kaluram Salvi she has further added to Vijaypura's reputation as a transparent and honest panchayat. Rukmani has herself worked as a worker at NREGA work sites and so she understands the problems of workers very well. She has also received the Women's Political Empowerment Day Award given by the Institute of Social Science, New Delhi.

Rukmani is a dalit pradhan from a general seat who won by defeating a candidate from a very rich family. This rich candidate spent excessive money on elections. Rukmani spent only Rs. 2000/- and each rupee was accounted for properly.

Today Vijaypura provides an inspiring example of a completely transparent and honest panchayat where a system of transparency is well-established. Here one can see how a scheme like MGNREGS is actually implemented according to the letter and spirit of the law. Here one can see how people actually get employment for 100 days under this scheme. Using MGNREGS funds pastures, greenery, soil and water conservation have been promoted, so that water scarcity can be overcome and livelihood base can improve in a water-scarce, drought-prone area.

Naurati is sarpanch of Harmara panchyat (Ajmer district). She is a dalit sarpanch who won from a reserved seat. She has been a well known activist associated with various struggles of organisations like MKSS and Barefoot College. She has emphasised transparency and good implementation of MGNREGA including water-conservation work.

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Chapter 13

Vijaypura - Dalit Leadership Creates A Model Panchayat

Most villages of Central Rajasthan present a dull, dry landscape where only a few bushes create a pretence of some greenery. So in Vijaypura it was a pleasant surprise to see a vast expanse of greenery. This panchayat, located in Devgarh block of Rajsamand district is widely known for its water conservation and pasture protection work. As we climbed a small hilltop from where we could gain a good overview of this panchayat spread over a wide area, we could see a dense growth of greenery the like of which is rare to see in this part of Rajasthan. In another area the greenery was relatively less dense but nevertheless impressive. In the middle of this greenery pools of water conserved by check dams and anicuts could be seen.

As we descended the hill and opened the makeshift gate of a protected pasture (surrounded by a stone enclosure recently created by villagers), we could see grass growing well and covering most of the land. Till just five years back this pasture land was devoid of almost any greenery, we were told. Then villagers built small check dams to conserve water, planted trees (indigenous species like babool and neem) and built the stone enclosure wall. On the one hand the land received the benefit of soil and moisture conservation, allowing greenery to return, while on the other hand

the fragile regeneration was protected from grazing or other damage. The result was that regeneration of greenery got a good chance. Now in a few years time, the greenery is so widespread that ,as the choukidar (guard) appointed by the village community says, wild life including bears have started returning to it.

The thorny paths here may be problematic for outsiders but for the villagers this new greenery and water conservation presents the key to the higher potential for secure, sustainable livelihoods of animal husbandry and agriculture. As Kaalu Salvi, a former sarpanch of this panchayat told me, "Grass taken from this pasture is already fed to cattle and goats. Later when there is more greenery, grazing here can be allowed. Water collected by anicuts is helping farmers to increase crop production. As a result of water conservation at many points, the water in a small stream flowing nearby has increased significantly."

Kaalu has a broad smile on his face when he says, "It is this greenery, this water which is the real way to security for villagers, and just as we've achieved this, so can others."

Kaalu has good reasons to feel satisfied, as his tireless efforts for nearly 12 years have given such good results as to not only create a firm base for sustainable livelihoods in Vijaypura but also create a replicable model which can inspire similar efforts by other panchayats.

While such a big change in a relatively short time is possible only with the enthusiastic efforts of a large

number of villagers, a key role has been played by Kaalu and his wife Rukmani (the present sarpanch). Kaalu and Rukmani in turn give a lot of credit to the support the couple received from MKSS. The reputation of the MKSS for firmly opposing corruption and irregularities helped Kaalu and Rukmani to keep away those vested interests who demand cuts and commissions in development works.

For MKSS members it is important that apart from opposing corruption they should also help to create an alternative decentralisation model which is free from corruption and irregularities. It is this endeavour of the MKSS which has been fulfilled by sarpanches like Kaalu and Rukmini who have shown by their leadership how honest implementation of government scheme like MGNREGA can go a long way in improving rural life and livelihoods.

What makes this story even more inspiring is that the leadership of Kaalu and Rukmani has come from the minority dalit community of this village. Vijaypura's population consists of about 50% OBCs, 35% dalits and 15% present a mix of various other castes. From the point of view of an inclusive democracy, it is particularly encouraging that while the entire community has contributed, the panchayat leadership during the most significant period of change has been in the hands of dalits.

For Kaalu the inspiring story began in year 2001 when he was elected as a ward panch. Although there are many limitations on how far a ward panch can go,

Kaalu created a fine example of how a ward panch can also play a very useful role. Ward meetings were held regularly and development works were initiated in accordance with the decisions taken at there meetings. This was accomplished despite the fact that the sarpanch was not very cooperative. A lot of attention was given to proper implementation of drought relief work, proper preparation of 'below poverty line' list and transparent functioning.

In year 2005 panchayat elections Vijaypura sarpanch seat was declared to be a non-reserved, general seat. Although it is difficult for dalit candidates to win from general seats nevertheless several villagers encouraged Kaalu to contest this election on the basis of good work that he had done earlier. While his opponents spent lakhs of Rs. Kaalu spent just about a thousand Rs. in a very disciplined and frugal campaign which observed all the rules and norms of elections. So it was a victory of democracy when Kaalu Salvi won the election.

An important achievement of Kaalu was that the rural employment guarantee (MGNREG) could be implemented as per the official rules as well as according to the true spirit of this law. According to the precept of 'Nyari napti nyari rate' payments were made strictly according to the actual work done so that those who worked properly could earn the proper wage, but those who worked less were paid less. Village level plans were made as per the priorities of the people. Ward sabha and gram sabha meetings were held regularly. Water conservation, pasture protection and tree

plantation was prioritised. New schools were opened where necessary. Encroachments were removed. New tanks and handpumps were constructed to improve the supply of drinking water. Village paths were improved significantly and sanitation was emphasised.

Above all a highly transparent system of functioning was created. All the details of development work and their budgets were painted on the wall at a very early stage here, and from here this idea was accepted at a very high level and spread all over the state.

In the social sphere, activists of anti-social elements were checked. Practices of untouchability and discrimination were challenged. For example a deliberate step was taken to assign the task of providing drinking water to workers to a dalit woman despite the opposition of several villagers.

In year 2010 elections the sarpanch seat was reserved for women. Many villagers requested that Rukmini, Kaalu's wife who had been helpful in earlier efforts should contest this seat. She spent very little on election campaign while other candidates spent enormous sums. Still she could win with a good margin.

She has continued all the good work initiated by Kaalu. In addition as more work has been transferred to panchayats since then, this too is being monitored by panchayats. All in all, during the last 6 or 7 years this panchayat has witnessed tremendous progress and emerged as a model panchayat attracting visitors from far and wide.

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Chapter 14

Social Justice and Reform

While at the national level the work of the MKSS is known mainly in the context of right to information and employemt, or public hearings and social audits to fight corruption, as a community organisation MKSS has been involved in several other important isues relating to justice and social reforms.

MKSS has always given importance to equal participation of women. A substantial share of MKSS membership consists of women. Women workers toil at drought relief and rural employment works in large numbers and the workers employed here have been a top priority for MKSS.

As Shankar, a leading activist of MKSS emphasises, "Anyone can see clearly in these villages that women are very careful about the use of money and they always prioritise those expenses which will provide food and nutrition to their family. On the other hand, men who are exposed to various less important (or even harmful) expenses of market (tea, eating with friends in a hotel, tobacco, even liqour) are less likely to use the money carefully."

Therefore when women get a more important role in decision making it is likely that food security related aspects will be emphasised more, and more careful decisions relating to these will be taken.

Women have very strong feelings against liquor and already MKSS women members in particular have been involved in anti-liqour struggles in Saangawas and Ukrakhera panchayat areas. Several illegal liquor vends have been shut down as a result of these movements.

MKSS members particularly women have joined several protests against atrocities on women. The MKSS played an important role in initiating the 'Mahila Atyachar Virodhi Jan Andolan' as well as other state level women's movements and efforts. However some MKSS members feel that greater attention should have been given to maintaining continuity in anti-liquor efforts. Some members feel that there should be more full-time women activists.

MKSS has always played an active role in opposing communalism and communal forces. When communal elements were organising a bandh and forcing shopkeepers to shut their shops in a show of support for this bandh, the shops run by MKSS refused to close down even though these shops were vandalised. During the Babri Masjid demolition phase and later in the aftermath of the terrible violence at Gujarat, the MKSS stepped up its campaign for communal harmony.

MKSS volunteers went to Gujarat to serve at the relief centres organised by voluntary organisations for the victims of violence. Aruna Roy played an important role in the People's Tribunal organised to inquire into communal violence in Gujarat.

As a part of its campaign of communal harmony,

MKSS organised workshops and a women's convention.

The MKSS has been equally active in fighting injustice and discrimination against dalits. In Bhilwara MKSS activists like Bhanvar Meghvanshi used RTI effectively to expose the high incidence of atrocities against dalits. Public hearings and justice marches were also organised to focus attention on this issue. At Bhairukhera a campaign was launched for the satisfactory return of dalits to their homes. In Suliya village (Bhilwara district) when it became known that dalits were being denied access to a temple, a movement was launched for the successful entry of dalits in this temple.

In early days when MKSS activists worked for the correction of 'below poverty line' lists, this meant in practical terms that dalits had to be included often at the cost of OBC castes. This angered many people including relatives of MKSS activist Shankar Singh. It was a difficult time for activists who had just started working in this area. But they persisted with their firm beliefs and other incidents also made clear their commitment to the cause of dalits.

Even outside their core work area (for example in Barmer district) MKSS has made all possible efforts to come to the help of dalit victims of atrocities and oppression.

With the joining of Bhanvar Meghvanshi, the dalit front of the MKSS has become more active particu-

larly in Bhilwara district. A particularly promising initiative is the mobilisation of most marginalised and/or nomadic communities like Kalbelias and Banjaras. Public hearings to draw attention to their many-sided oppression and neglect have given a new hope to these communities.

MKSS has been opposing expensive and meanigless rituals like "Mrityubhojs' (feast after the death of a relative). MKSS members like Kheemaram and Lal Singh themselves set an example and there were interventions to check or stop such feasts at several places.

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Chapter 15

Land-Struggle and Mining

The many sided struggles of the MKSS started with a land struggle in which ordinary village were able to reclaim their pastures and common land from the illegal control of a feudal. The villagers worked hard to increase the green cover, planting thousands of trees, and although the feudal kept trying to harm their efforts, this greenery cover is still a big boon to villagers.

Much bigger challenges came up much later when the SEZ (Special Economic Zones) law was passed and it was widely believed that the state government was planning to give lakhs of acres of land for biofuel plantations. At this stage the MKSS in collaboration with other organisations of Rajasthan carried out a strong campaign against this proposal. Largely as a result of this effort, this proposal was withdrawn. However the threat is not entirely over and these organisations and people will have to remain alert to any such future threat. For the time being, however, a great danger to the environment and livelihood base of rural Rajasthan has been averted.

However several other serious threats to the agriculture and livelihood base of Rajasthan's villages need to be tackled with a sense of urgency. Multinational and other big companies are trying hard to increase their control over agriculture base by spreading their seeds and technology in several dubious ways.

This has to be resisted, and the alternative agro-ecology approach established, including components like organic farming, saving traditional seeds, water and soil-conservation etc.

Destructive mining practices are also a growing threat in the work-area of the MKSS. The MKSS is only beginning to face this challenge. In a recent convention on mining some strategies and alternative policy drafts were discussed, and local officials were convinced of the need to adopt transparency while giving mining leases.

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Chapter 16
Minimum Wage Struggle (Phase-II)

In year 2010 issues relating to the payment of legal minimum wage rate peaked once again for MKSS. There was a special emphasis on payment of legal minimum wages to NREGA workers whose number has been increasing significantly. To this was added a campaign for unionisation of NREGA workers.

One difference in this phase of the struggle was that now over 50 organisations were united under the Soochna Evam Rojgaar Adhikar Abhiyan (SERAA) - campaign for Right to Information and Employment. This was a joint struggle in which the MKSS made a very significant contribution.

The 'yatra' and people's contact programme of this movement started in September with the predominant demand for increasing the minimum wage rate for workers. The State Government had last notified the minimum wage rate at Rs 100 per day for unskilled labourers on May 24, 2008. As a result of the rapid rise in prices since then, a revision of the minimum wage rate was overdue. It may be pointed out here that Section 4 of the Minimum Wages Act 1948 provides for adjustment of minimum rates of wages with the variation in the cost of living index at periodic intervals.

As the mass contact programme of SERAA at-

tracted lakhs of people, the Rajasthan Government came under pressure and quickly announced (on September 29) the enhanced minimum wage rates of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labourers from the existing levels of Rs 100, Rs 107 and Rs 115 to Rs 135, Rs 145 and Rs 155 respectively from January 1, 2011. There was, however, one catch. The new rates would not automatically apply to the biggest category of workers, that is, workers employed in the MGNREGS (Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme). In the case of the MGNREGS workers, the State Government said, the additional wage of Rs 35 (Rs 135 minus Rs 100) will be paid only when the Central Government agrees to make this additional payment.

The wage rate of Rs 100 per day was last notified on January 1, 2008 by the Central Government. The Consumer Price Index had risen significantly between January 2008 and June 2010 without any corresponding enhancement in the minimum wage rate under the MGNREGS. A rise in the MGNREGS wage was therefore clearly overdue. This issue was discussed in the 12th and 13th Central Employment Guarantee Council meetings. The Working Group on Wages had submitted recommendations for expediting the settlement of the issue of indexing wages under the MGNREGS to the price level using the Consumer Price Index for agricultural labourers. The Finance Minister had also said the UPA Government is committed to paying a real wage of Rs 100 in the NREGS and this means a wage rate of Rs 100 plus the adjustment for

price rise.

Thus clearly there was a very strong ground for raising the MGNREGS wage, but the delay was due to confusion and uncertainty about who will bear the burden of the wage-rise—the State government or the Central Government.

Presenting the viewpoint of the Rajasthan Government, C.S. Rajan, Principal Secretary to the Government of Rajasthan, had written in a communication to Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (letter dated October 18, 2010): "Since the wages for unskilled manual workers under NREGS is borne entirely by the Central Government as per Section 21(i)(a) of the NREG Act 2005, it is requested that the minimum wage as finalised by the State Government may be notified by the Central Government at the earliest so that the enhanced minimum wage rates become applicable to the NREGA workers within the State at the earliest."

However, according to a note of the Government of India, January 1, 2009, "It has been decided to cap the wage rate at Rs 100 under NREGA. Expenditure on wage rate notified by State governments over and above Rs 100 would be borne by the respective State Government."

It was for the Centre and the State governments to resolve who will bear the wage burden of MGNREGS above the wage rate of Rs 100 per day, but what was clear above all is that legally it was not possible to pay

less than the minimum wage to the MGNREGS workers.

In the Sanjit Roy vs State of Rajasthan case the Supreme Court held (order dated January 20, 1983): "Whenever any labour or service is taken by the State from any person, whether he is affected by drought and scarcity conditions or not, the State must pay, at the least, minimum wage to such person on pain of violation of Article 23."

Indira Jaisingh, Additional Solicitor General, Government of India, gave her legal opinion: "The payment of wage below minimum wage would amount to forced labour."

Therefore, it is clear that as per the highly justified demands of SERAA which had a strong legal base and were engaging the attention of the State and the Central governments,

a) The minimum wage rate for the NREGS workers had to be raised to Rs 135 with effect from January 2011 as announcement of the rise in the overall minimum wage had already been made.

b) When the NREGS wage rate is raised in Rajasthan, it'll also have to be raised in all those States where the minimum wage rate is higher than the current NREGS wage rate.

c) Once the freeze on the MGNREGS wage rate is lifted, then benefits will sooner or later reach all parts of the country.

d) This movement had also raised the demand for linking the MGNREGS wage to a properly worked out Consumer Price Index so that future wage rises will take place in response to price rise at regular intervals.

e) The SERAA movement had also established a People's Pay Commission so that the concerns of the poorest sections are not ignored in future when decisions on pay/wage rise are taken.

f) The SERAA movement effectively raised issues like glaring underpayment of workers' dues and long delays in payment. It has received government assurance for payment of compen-sation if the MGNREGS payments are delayed.

g) This movement has focused attention on the shocking levels of inequalities in income which are being promoted by the government's policies. This effort has led to mass mobilisation on the issue of income inequalities as workers and small farmers realise the glaring injustice of the existing system.

The demands of this movement were met to a significant extent by the state government but some issues till remained.

This movement thus had a great potential for not only giving immediate benefits to the poorest workers but also challenging the glaring inequalities in income.

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Chapter 17

Lokpal Debate

The year 2011 was dominated by the Lokpal debate. The NCPRI made a important contribution by presenting alternative framework of anti-corruption laws and rules. Some members of the MKSS made a crucial contribution to this entire effort.

The NCPRI also prepared a set of guiding principles for formulating anti-corruption and grievance redress measures in India. Its recent exercise to prepare guidelines and a set of anti-corruption proposals based on these guidelines is in keeping with the NCPRI's valuable contribution earlier on transparancy and related issues.

While some of the anti-corruption proposals made by the NCPRI are more specific to the context of India, the guiding principles formulated by this campaign have a much wider relevance. Similarly the grievance redressal mechanism worked out by the NCPRI has a much wider relevance for other democracies.

The guiding principles formulated by the NCPRI say that anti-corruption institutions must be financially, administratively and legally independent of those whom they are called upon to investigate and prosecute. These institutions must be given adequate powers and resources to both investigate complaints and to ensure the effective prosecution of cases.

At the same time, each anti-corruption institution must itself be accountable in the same manner that it seeks to make other institutions accountable. The functioning of these anti-corruption institutions and authorities must also be transparent. In particular appointments to these institutions must be done transparently and in a participatory manner.

Anti-corruption institutions and processes must be free and impartial to both the complainant and the accused and ensure that honest persons are not harassed.

While creation of new institutions may be needed or even be essential given the inadequacy of existing anti-corruption institutions, the tendency should not be to dismantle and destroy the existing arrangements, but instead to initiate reforms and add new institutions only for clearly defined roles. Initial complaints must lie with each public authority, and they must be given an opportunity for reform. To this should be added the provision of appeals to new independent bodies.

Each institution should be of a manageable size with clearly defined tasks, with no single institution becoming so large that its effective management and control itself becomes a new and serious problem. Circularity of the kind in which various institutions find themselves overseeing each other's functioning and integrity should be avoided as far as possible.

Anti-corruption institutions should be accompanied by a strong grievance redress mechanism. Such

a system reaching the remotest places should be a decentralised system moving from bottom to top. The creation of the infra-structure of such a system should be preceded by citizens' charters of various public authorities which will codify comprehensively the entitlements of citizens; in terms of service delivery as well as democratic rights. Social audits of government expenditures and contracts, policies and programmes should be regularly conducted in a democratic way with participation of people. The findings of social audits can then be linked to the grievance redressal system.

Based on these guiding principles, the NCPRI has come up with a package of specific proposals for fighting corruption and strengthening grievance redressal in India. These include making some new laws and creating some new institutions, but in addition this also includes strengthening existing institutions and amending those laws which are already under the consideration of Parliament.

More specifically, the proposals called for the setting up of a Lokpal anti-corruption commission at the centre to cover the Prime Minister, Ministers, MPs and Class 'A' Officers. At the state-level Lokayukta anti-corruption commissions need to be set up to cover complaints relating to the Chief Ministers, Ministers, MLAs, MLCs, Councillors and senior officers. In both cases anyone who happens to be a co-accused will also be covered.

Secondly, the NCPRI called for amending the

Judicial Accountability and Standards Bill which was already under the consideration of the Parliament to ensure the accountability of the higher judiciary.

There was a third proposal to strengthen the Central Vigilance Commission and bring in under its perview all officers not covered under the Lokpal bill. At the same time independent State Vigilance Commissions need to be set up in all the states.

An effective law to protect whistleblowers and those who use right to information should be enacted.

Grievance redressal laws need to be enacted to set up commissions at the central and state-level and other infra-structure that reaches all parts of the country and provides for a bottom to top system of grievance redressal.

Chapter 18

Towards A National Law For Citizens' Charters And Grievance Redressal

A lot of discontent has been piling up in our country due to the lack of accountability in timely redressal of citizens' grievances. As complaints pile up in government offices, so does the unrest among people.

It is only recently that a few state governments have taken some significant initiatives for setting up system for timely redressal of citizens' grievances. These should be welcomed, but these are not adequate. A national level initiative for this is still keenly awaited.

The UPA government has belatedly recognised the importance of this task and is now hopefully working towards enaction of national level legislation for citizens' charters and grievance redressal.

Essentially any such law must have at least three components. Firstly there should be a declaration by all public authorities about their duties, responsibilities and commitments towards citizens. Wherever necessary these should be listed in the form of time-bound commitments.

Secondly, in the case of violation of any of these commitments to citizens, there should be a system of time-bound redressal of any complaints and grievances

received from common citizens or their organisations.

Thirdly, in the case of violation of such grievance redressal there should be a system of appeal to independent authorities which can give orders for quick, time-bound redressal of grievances, as well as for punishing the officials responsible for delays and compensating the citizens who have suffered in the process.

Anyone familiar with the RTI legislation can clearly see that there are many similarities and while drafting the law on grievance redressal we can learn much from the experience of the earlier RTI law. So it was only appropriate that the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) which had played such an important role in the enaction of the RTI has become closely involved in the mobilisation for a comprehensive legislation on grievance redressal.

On the one hand the campaign with the help of the MKSS and some other organisations prepared a draft of grievance redressal law and on the other hand it also organised workshops and meetings not only to mobilise people but also to discuss the practical aspects of the implementation of this law in various contexts such as education, health, public distribution system, rural employment guarantee scheme, panchayat raj etc.

A particularly strong focus of NCPRI's efforts is to try to ensure that the poor and more vulnerable people in remote villages are also able to benefit adequately from this law.

Keeping this aspect in view the NCPRI draft suggests setting up suitably equipped citizens' facilitation centered in all blocks of the country so that citizens can get adequate help in sending their grievances to the appropriate authority. Even if the grievance is being sent to a public authority of the central government, a villager will have to go just up to the block headquarters (or contact by telephone/e-mail) to avail the help from the facilitation centre (including the use of computers etc.) so that his/her complaint is sent to the proper place and can also be monitored.

In the NCPRI's draft all public authorities are supposed to have a grievance redressal officer (GRO) who will be responsible for the receipt and timely redressal of grievances, whether these are received directly from citizens or from block grievances centre.

However if grievances are not settled in time or if the citizen involved is not satisfied with the order of the GRO, then this citizen can first appeal to a district level appellate authority. Lastly appeal can be made to state-level and central-level commissions for redressal of grievances which will be set up specially for this purpose.

It is hoped that such a system of independent appellate authority with provisions for punishment of offending officers and compensation for suffering citizens will go a long way in satisfactory redressal of grievances.

A Convention on Grievance Redress and

Whistleblowers' Protection was organised on October 10 and 11 at Bluebells International School, N.Delhi.

The NCPRI organised this convention with the support and cooperation of a wide range of other organisations including the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana (MKSS), SNS, PUCL (Rajasthan), RTF, NFIW, RTI Manch, National Alliance for Peoples' Movements, NCDHR, NACDOR, Pratirodh, Soochna-Rojgar Abhiyan, Accountability Initiative, JJS (Bihar), Inclusive Media for Change and others.

Starting the convention Aruna Roy highlighted the need for different types of processes and resolutions for different types of mal-governance such as corruption and grievances. She emphasised that effective grievance redress mechanisms must be decentralized, transparent and accessible.

Shekhar Singh said that non-performance by a state functionary is equivalent to corruption. He also called upon people to demand their due from the government instead of being resigned to half-measures.

Kuldeep Nayyar chronicled the struggle for passage of the RTI Act, and the innovative ways it was being put to use at the grassroots. He emphasised the crucial contribution of MKSS activists in the enaction of RTI law.

A special emphasis in this convention was on highlighting the experiences of those activists who have suffered much in the process of redressal of grievances of people. Several such activists were invited to speak

at this convention.

A seperate session with officials and politicians emphasised that complete and effective implementation of any grievance redress law requires that the government allocate resources commensurate to entitlements guaranteed. The increasing rate of privatisation needs new legislation to ensure redress of people's problems, and thus PPPs should be included within the ambit of the law.

Participants at the convention debated the proposed mechanisms of grievance redress within the context of different sectors in 15 parallel sectoral workshops on PDS, health, education, panchayats, ICDS, social security, NREGA, social exclusion, RTI etc. Important recommendations from these workshops have emerged.

The convention concluded with resolutions passed by general consensus. These include : There is unanimous agreement that we do not want any amendments to the RTI Act. Before considering any amendments, adequate public consultation must be held. There is unanimous agreement that there must be a Grievance Redress Law and Whistleblower Protection. The government is urged to put up draft Bills on Grievance Redress and Whisleblower Protection for widespread public consultation immediately. Grievance Redress mechanism must be as decentralised as possible, must be independent, and have an element of people's support. The definition of whistleblowing must

be expanded beyond institutional and economic corruption to include injustice and arbitrary use of power. The grievance redress mechanisms and other institutions must have the ability to use whistleblowers law to afford protection to those filling complaints/grievances. Any private body charged with implementation of any entitlement or sovereign function under any government program or law must come within the ambit of the Grievance Redress Bill.

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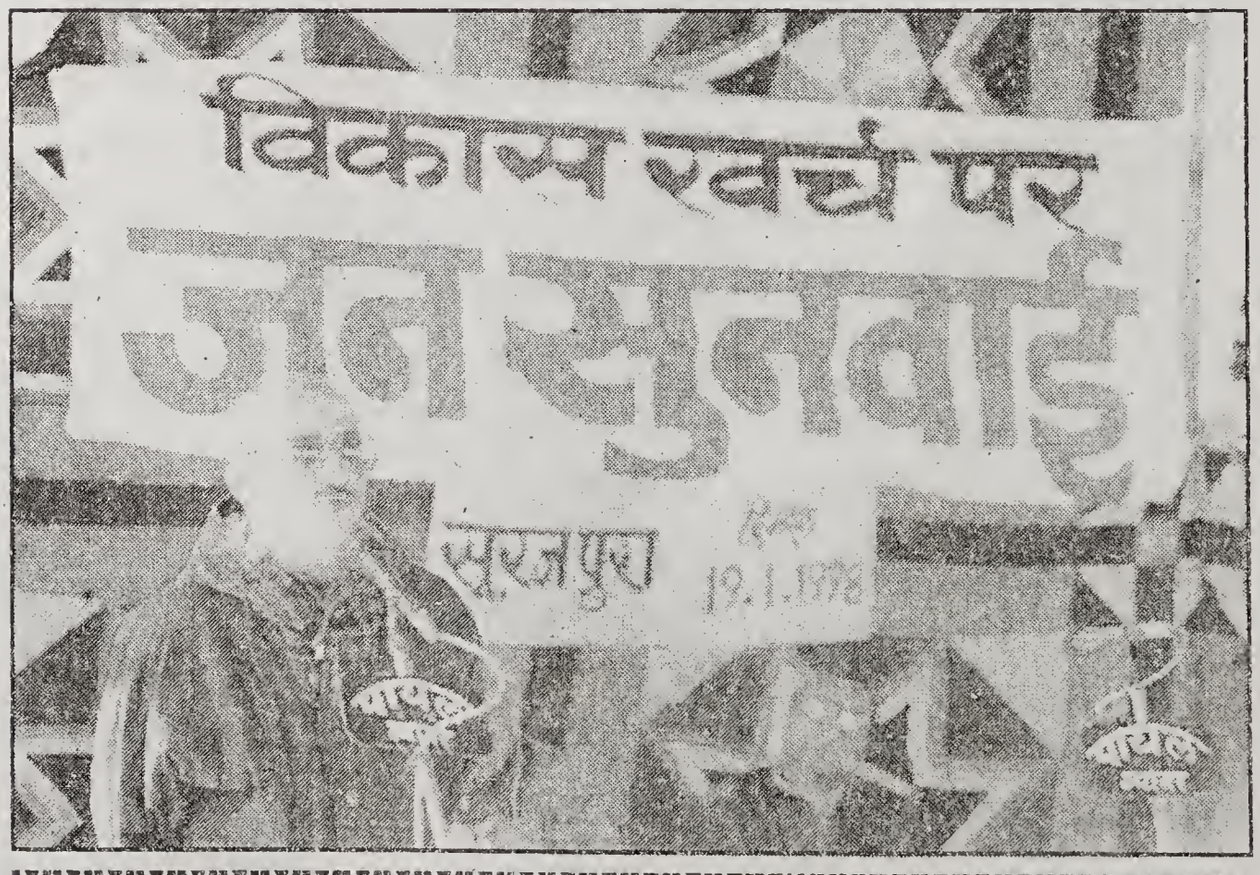

Chapter 19

School For Democracy

The School For Democracy is based on the vision of Aruna Roy but has benefited much from the inputs of various MKSS members as well as other friends. Its campus in Thana panchayat of Bhilwara district (this is just about 15 kms. from the main Devdungri village office of the MKSS in Rajsamand district) is still under-construction but already some exciting and useful inter-actions have been held in the under construction campus. This includes meetings on mining policy, Lokpal and fundamental rights.

The School For Democracy is expected to provide a badly needed place for many-sided learning and training on democracy. As Aruna says, this is envisaged as a facilitation centre for learning - not a teaching institutions but a learning institution. It will have a floating faculty. Courses will be designed according to the needs of the learners.

The construction work and a corpus fund for the School For Democracy became possible because of donations from several friends of MKSS like Kamla Bhasin and Arundhati Roy.

Earlier Aruna Roy had donated her own prize money from Magsaysay Award for the Jan Hith Trust which over the years has given small fellowships generally for work which strengthens grassroots democracy in various ways.

The School For Democracy has also brought out several valuable publications and also publishes a journal 'Diamond India'.

An incidental benefit has been that the MKSS and sister organisations have a place for holding important meetings and dialogues (which they never had earlier) which is located reasonably close to Devdungri.

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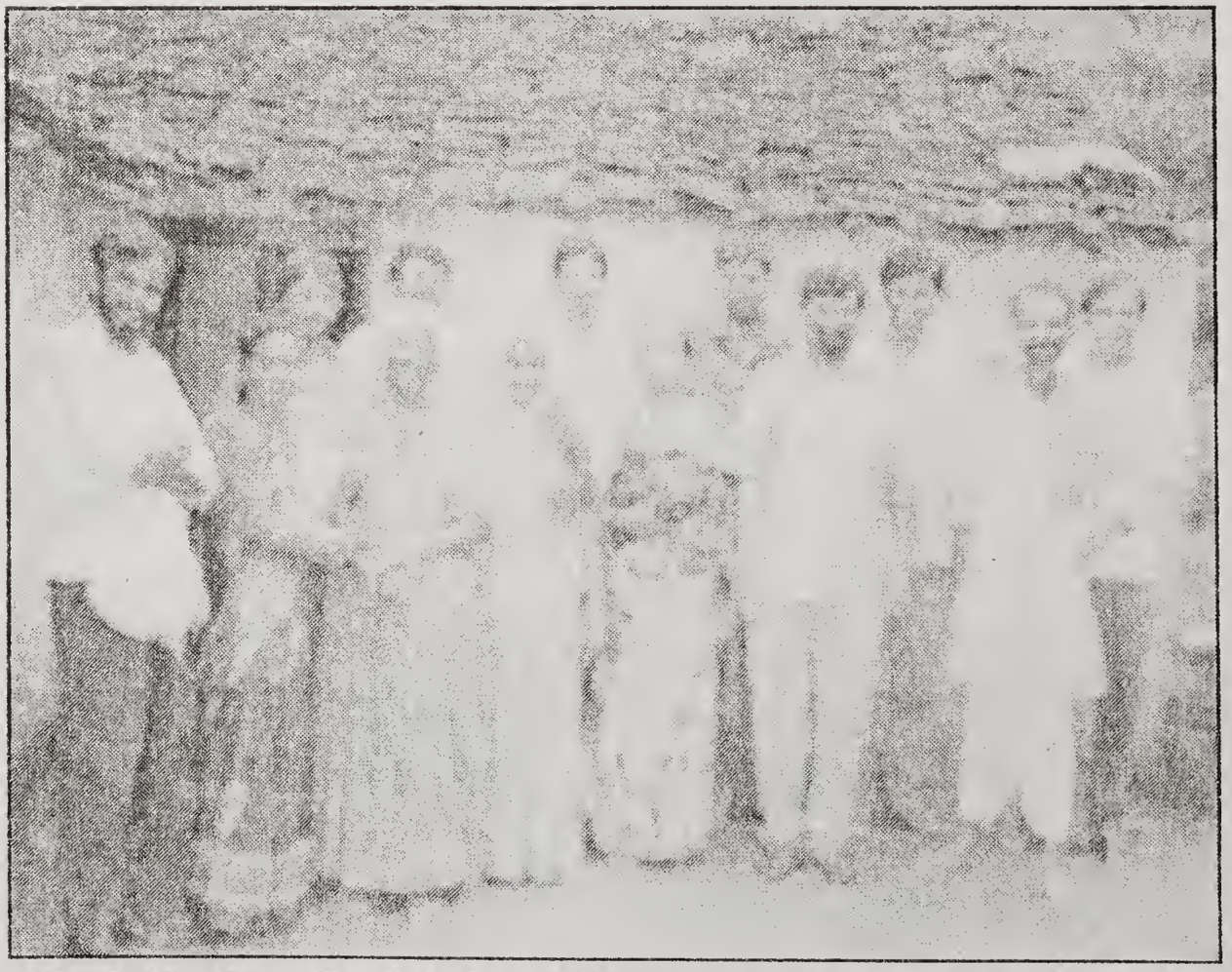

Chapter 20

Friends and Comrades

What many friends and well-wishers of MKSS cherish most is the chance for inter-action with a group of exceptionally dedicated persons with many different kinds of talents. As Panini Anand, a journalist-writer friend of MKSS says, "Over the years while coming to the MKSS area what I looked forward to most was the chance to meet persons like Lal Singh, Chunni Singh, Lakshmi, Susheela, Balu, Parshuram, Mohan Ram, Chunni Bai, Kheemaram and Douba, each one of them a symbol of dedication."

Apart from MKSS members from the work-area's villages, friends like Renuka Pamecha, Mamta Jaitly, Bhanwar Singh, Shekhar Singh, Harsh Mander, Maaza Venkatesh, Kirti, Prabhash Joshi, Ajit Bhattacharya, Kuldeep Nayar, Nikhil Chakravarty, Rajni Bakshi, Kavita Srivastava, D.L. Tripathi, Jean Dreaze, Bela Bhatia, Tripurari Sharma, Shiv, Kamla Bhasin, Arundhati Roy, Gopal Gandhi, Jogendra Bhagat, Sidhartha, Chandna Dey, S.R. Shankaran, Annie Raja, Surendra Mohan and Dr. Patwa have been a source of invaluable support. Former Prime Minister V.P. Singh was also an admirer of the work of MKSS.

Several middle (and upper-middle) class youths came and worked with the MKSS for some time, making good contributions. Most of them continued to do very useful work after they left the MKSS - for example

Vijay contributed in the area of human rights, Kamayani works in the villages of Bihar, Soumya has done path-breaking work on social audits in Andhra Pradesh and Preeti has contributed with her useful research on Special Economic Zones. Rakshita, Ruchi, Mukesh, Pushpa, Nilofar, Nandani and Inayat are still making their valuable contribution with the MKSS. Youths like Mukesh Goswami and Kamal left highly-paid jobs to be able to work with sister organisations of MKSS.

This is at best an indicative list - many more invaluable friends of MKSS are being left out than are included. This is just to indicate that linkages and friendships nurtured by the MKSS also contributed to its many-sided successes. In various areas linkages with different organisations have been particularly useful (for example the strong bonds with Barefoot College in Central Rajasthan, or the more recent linkages with Aasthaa and other organisations in South Rajasthan). Bunker Roy, Ramkaran and the Barefoot College family have always been true friends. Allaripu made a great contribution with support on the cultural front. Networks like 'I CAN' as well as some networks the MKSS helped to start have been valuable partners.

Chapter 21

Mela With A Message

All people's organisations need at least one day in a year when their members and friends can all get together to reflect, plan and discuss, gossip, celebrate, sing and dance. This is particularly true for a village based organisation whose members are scattered in remote villages.

For MKSS this annual get-together coincides with Workers' Day celebrated on 1st May. Not just MKSS members in Rajasthan but also its friends all over the country know that this is the best time in the year when they can hope to find all leading MKSS activists at one place.

A special feature of this famous Mazdoor Kisan Mela is that serious work and 'mela' activities proceed side by side. So people are enjoying their 2 Rs. lemonade or 5 Rs. jalebi plate/bhujia platter at the same time as a collector is explaining an initiative in which ward panches could contribute to the better implementation of NREGA.

This annual mela is held every year in Bhim, a conveniently located kasba in the MKSS work area of central Rajasthan. Here peasants and workers join hands with students and interns to turn the dull, flat landscape into a lively, vibrant mela site. The main shamiana is surrounded by stalls where low-cost books, t-shirts, kurtas, crafts and toys are sold along with a wide variety of mouth-watering eatables. Occasionally

a cow or a bullock manages to sneak into the proceedings.

At the MKSS mela of year 2011, what impressed me most was that serious issues such as those of Lokpal, minimum wages and unions of NERGA workers could be discussed in the setting of a mela. The assembled people felt free to go to a food stall, or meet friends, or concentrate on what is being said from the stage. Yet there was enough discipline in the audience so that when very important issues were being discussed there is good response from the audience.

One important issue discussed at this year's (2011) mela related to the mobilisation that is needed to continue the struggle for obtaining the legal minimum wages of Rs. 135 for NREGA workers in Rajasthan as well as sorting out other problems faced by these workers. The assembled people raised their hands in large numbers to assert that they'll collect foodgrains in their villages to support this struggle and they'll also come for rallies and dharnas.

The need for according legal recognition to unions of NREGA workers was emphasised. Several groups of workers marched to the stage to introduce themselves as members of union of NREGA workers from various areas. But their union has not yet been registered by the government. So getting this union registered will be an important step forward in the near future.

It was also interesting and instructive to see how the complex issue of Lokpal/Jan Lokpal bill was dis-

cussed in a way that the debate could be taken up at a much wider level at the grassroots. And in the middle of all this there were songs, slogans, puppets and folk-theatre.

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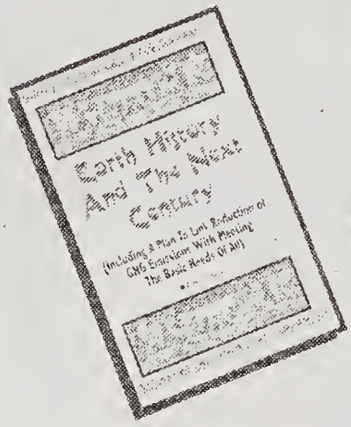
Some Other Books written by Bharat Dogra



Earth History And The Next Century

(Including a plan to link reduction of GHG emissions with meeting the basic needs of all)

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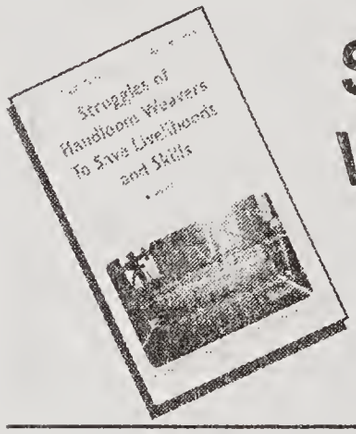

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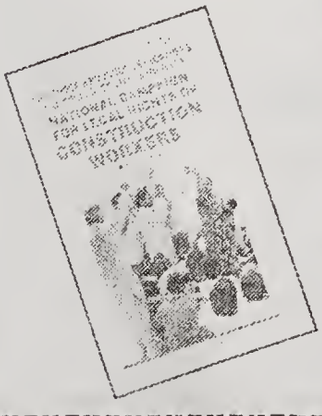
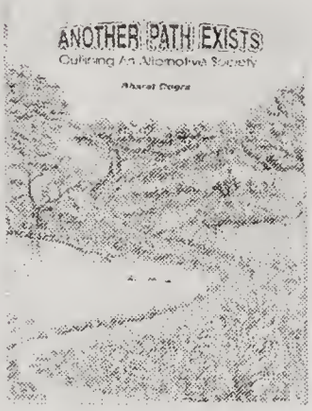


Why Those Who Build Skyscrapers Are Forced to Live in Hovels?

National Campaign for Legal Rights of Construction Workers

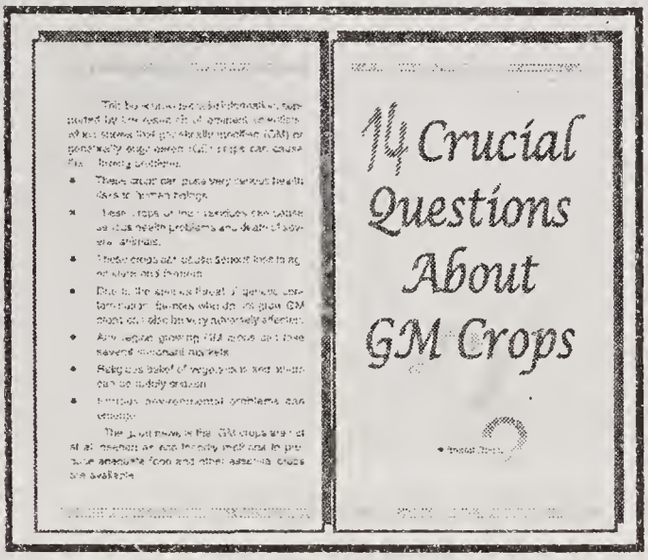
Pages 32, Price Rs. 30



Another Path Exists

Outlining An Alternative Society

Pages 240. Rs. 180/, $10 outside India.



This book provides solid information, supported by the research of eminent scientists, which shows that genetically modified (GM) or genetically engineered (GE) crops can cause the following problems :

- These crops can pose very serious health risks to human beings.
- These crops or their residues can cause serious health problems and death of several animals.
- These crops can cause serious loss to agriculture and farmers.
- Due to the serious threat of genetic contamination, farmers who do not grow GM crops can also be very adversely affected.
- Any region growing GM crops can lose several important markets.
- Religious belief of vegetarians and others can be rudely shaken.
- Serious environmental problems can emerge.

The good news is that GM crops are not at all needed as eco-friendly methods to produce adequate food and other essential crops are available.

Pages 112, Rs. 120/, $ 9 outside India.

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Contact Persons - Madhu and Bharat Dogra

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